

Lesley Battler | **Journal** | 1998





## Journal archive project

### Introduction

As a young reader i was fascinated by diaries, journals, notebooks of all kinds. Perhaps part of that attraction was that they seemed a way of telling your own story, remaking the world as you went on. “They” never have the final say in your journal.

I grew up in a family that was shattered by mental illness and writing in a journal was a discipline and a way of keeping myself together; proof I could build an independent life. I was never big on recording my most intimate feelings or expressing myself. For me, the journal existed to help me let go and move beyond the emotional, interior world. I was so much more interested in recording the flora and fauna of the mundane. Daily life was exotic to me.

From the 1980s and on into the Naughts, I wrote in a journal, which I eventually transcribed into electronic format as a project to keep me occupied during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. At first it felt like a self-indulgent pastime, certainly a little irrelevant considering world-events, but as I continued I started feeling maybe there was some value to the project. I decided to preserve them as archives, format them as PDFs and release them onto the Internet where anyone can search, download and use any of the material for projects of their own.

To me, this journal is really an archive, portrait of an era as seen by one insignificant person. It's the insignificance that is truly key here. I love the archives and records of the invisible lives that accumulate into social zeitgeists. Being a journal, it's hit-and-miss what I wrote about, or had time to write about. Huge chunks of my life never made it to the page while there may be hundreds of words devoted to a movie I enjoyed on a hot summer night. I have not added any narrative arc or changed names to keep the journal as intact as possible.

In such a long time span the journal volumes reveal a generation trying to find their way in the world; me and so many of my friends and acquaintances working contract jobs, going to community colleges to learn vocational skills. Spoiler alert: societal change, turbulence, employment issues, generational conflict were just as strong then as they are now. While transcribing the journals I also became fascinated by the rhythm of daily life, how periods of calm so often erupt into times of intense change.

I have taken the original journals and reformatted them into chronological years that begin in January and end in December, and I have included a synopsis with each one to provide a little context. I preserved as much as possible the style and quirks of the original handwritten journals and only employed some light editing to correct place names, and obvious mis-spellings.

These volumes are meant for anyone who is interested in the 1980s and 1990s, in archives, in the lives of young people trying to find a place in the world, in personal impressions of socio-economic-cultural events. This, of course, includes the introduction of the Internet to our daily lives. Please feel free to browse, reuse, recycle any of this material for your own projects. After all this time I still believe information wants to be free.

### **Vol. 18, 1998**

Ice storm – Doing lunch with lawyers – Trip to the Netherlands for Oma's funeral – A brouhaha and flight to Antwerp – To the seaside with an ogre in tow – Touring around Zeeland – Inside the executive boardroom – Business trip to Longboat Key, Florida – Association of Railway Communicators Conference – Washed off the road – Another day, another wrong turn – The Colony Beach and Tennis Resort – I win an award for "Lesley's Excellent Adventures" – A perfect moment in time – Exit, pursued by a hurricane – Hot air ballooning in Alberta.

**Jan. 2**

So far this winter has been much more merciful than last year, but it still has that eerie, petrified quality. Winter is always isolating but there's a dry sparseness here that makes it seem more drastic. Ice fog and dry snow glinting in the air. The ground is frozen and the snow we received shortly before Christmas hasn't melted although the temperature has been well above freezing. I enjoy walking to work via the alleyway. Dark at seven a.m then the sky becomes a rich blue. Light is so important here. Everything is light and air and has a kind of unearthliness about it. Dark again coming home. Snow-tipped evergreens. The sheds in the alleyway make me think of cottages and I like imagining I'm following a path through a shtetl.

At work everyone talking about the threat of a transit strike. At least the Montréal transferees have been talking about that. Most of us take transit and many of us don't have alternate ways of getting into work. Larry earnestly questioned his bus driver about the strike. We all joked about him taking over the company and instituting Stilwellism.

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Saw *the Ice Storm*, directed by Ang Lee. It's centered on two Connecticut families, neighbours at a crisis point during Thanksgiving weekend in 1973. A subtle creepy tension set up and maintained throughout the movie. As the emotional ante with each character was upped (I'm starting to sound like Terry Byrnes here) the ice storm in the background increased in intensity. You could feel, and hear, the chill. Wind gathering force, first tapping of the freezing rain on the chilled window.

The characters are deeply inside houses, rather like Buñuel films. The son is stranded in a commuter train when the storm hits. None of these places provide them any real shelter. Their unhappiness is so subtly portrayed it's almost like emotional carbon monoxide. Meanwhile the exterior world seizes up. Houses entombed in ice, windows like gouged hockey rinks. Branches crash to the ground, everything glowing like radioactive crystal, a deadly radium world. One of the children is killed when he handles a fallen power wire.

### **Jan. 5-13**

Isn't it ironic. Only four days after seeing the movie, *the Ice Storm*, the entire eastern seaboard was devastated by an ice storm. Montréal, Kingston, Ottawa all down into New England. I imagine a new Ice Age, glaciers moving in, power lines dropping to the ground. Too dangerous to move or touch anything. A burning cold and incessant dripping as icicles build and perfect themselves. I have been obsessed with photos of this storm, or series of storms. Along the sloped streets of Montréal an unearthly whiteness entombing the leaves and branches. Silver-white, moonlit Venetian glass. Ice cliff roofs. Bound by a hard beauty.

A dark city on the news. Black-out zones. Life during wartime. Army troops have arrived in the blacked-out city. Temperatures now dropping to -12 degrees. Police have invoked emergency powers, allowing them to order people out of their homes and into communal shelters, arenas, schools, stadiums, etc. At one seniors' home in downtown Montréal police found thirty-nine people huddled in the freezing cold. The chief of defense is considering a mass evacuation of the South Shore. People were ordered to boil their drinking water for five minutes because filtration plants were not working properly. The chaos escalated after dozens of steel towers supporting high-voltage transmission lines came crashing down.

By Jan. 12 all transportation systems were frozen, roads blocked, airports shut down. No train traffic between Montréal, Toronto, Québec and Ottawa. Stores ran out of basic goods as well as batteries. Bank machines and automatic doors permanently shut. Pharmacists used flashlights to walk people, one by one, through the dark aisles while others waited in line outside.

People tried heating their homes with whatever they could find to avoid going to shelters. In one house, police found people who had soaked a roll of toilet paper in lighter fluid and set it on fire to keep warm. Others started their car engines so they could warm up from time to time causing a few to die of carbon monoxide poisoning. Barbecues, fireplaces and unventilated heating units. Temperatures plummeted to -20. Police, military personnel and volunteers went door to door to evacuate people to shelters and they met some intense resistance in Cote St-Luc. Holocaust survivors screamed and fought the military personnel who showed up at their doors.

Hospitals lost their primary power, traffic lights failed, the Metro was closed, radio and TV stations lost their broadcast signals. Grocery stores reported panic buying of supplies. Shelters were doing their best to accommodate Muslims who had to fast between sunrise and sunset to celebrate Ramadan. A Via Rail train carrying about a hundred passengers from Ottawa took more than eighteen hours to reach Toronto because of felled trees blocking the track, and other delays. The passengers were apparently not fed or informed as to what was going on. Via is in big trouble. Fred's mother was put out because she had to park her car on the street. Where is Peter Mansbridge when you really need him?

**Jan. 14**

In October I took a creative writing class at Mount Royal College with Sarah Murphy. This was strictly for meeting new people in Calgary as I have had more than my fill of these classes. One of my classmates was Bill Fric, who is a lawyer. He really likes my work and called me at CP and suggested I fax him some of my work then we could have a “businessman’s lunch” at Cannery Row and talk about writing. I was thrilled. Not only at the prospect of meeting someone and talking about something besides work, but besides he’s the first non-CPR person I will have met for lunch since arriving in Calgary.

**Jan. 20**

Met Bill for our lunch at Cannery Row. I had faxed him two stories and was worried that I had gone a little over the top and taken advantage of his interest in my writing. These days I’m always worried about appearing like a lunatic. Cannery Row is very close to Gulf Canada Square and I was early. I picked a table and watched lunches in progress. Men and women in suits, groups that could only be office groups, not only because of corporate dress codes but because of the way no one really meshes with each other. No shared gestures, figures of speech, etc. Just business jargon.

Bill arrived in full work drag. In class he dresses casually. Today he wore a black suite and colourful tie and he looked like an old-school lawyer. He is very good at putting people at ease though, a very nice man. He asked questions and seemed really interested in finding out about me. As for the stories, “I didn’t like them,” he said. Just as I was about to launch into a litany of apologies for sending so much, he cut me off at the pass by saying, “I loved them.” He then said he would gladly read anything I’ve written. Bill is a voracious reader so this is quite a compliment.



We talked about our class and about how little money there is in writing, how much work it is with so little gain. He said he had read far too many literary pieces that had to do with struggling writers and not enough of the real world. I couldn't agree more. He thinks I could have some trouble publishing my stuff because it isn't literary enough for the editors but he would go personally out of his way to read it. We both felt Sarah had given me short shrift and agreed she probably assumed I was a corporate stooge. I thanked Bill for defending "Ice Fog" in class. The silence had been deafening and then Sarah's art-world pet, Mary, cut in with her sarcastic comment, "Is this a big step up the corporate ladder?" I guess this means I can be abused by two groups now. Not corporate enough for the corporation and not literary enough for Canlit.

I really enjoyed my lunch with Bill. He is sensitive and also sharp and competitive. He speaks with a lot of compassion about his clients. He is thoughtful and perceptive and says he is happier when he's writing than when he's not.

He has five children and is devoted to them. The oldest is sixteen. Most of them are like him with their love of reading. He said he respects people who get grad degrees in English. He went straight to law school and envies English majors a little because he loves to read, and you major in something like English because you love it.

### **March 10**

Bill and I have been going to a creative writing class at the U of C with Rosemary Nixon. Rosemary couldn't be more different from Sarah Murphy and is structured, efficient and rigorous. A small dynamic woman who constantly refers to her "very religious" Mennonite background. I have enjoyed the class but I think her reaction to my story tonight was a personal knee-jerk reaction.

The classes are structured and timed and they never vary in format. The first part is taken up with class discussion of a famous short story then we move on to stories submitted by the class. Tonight my relocation story was up for discussion. It was new work and I turned this one in because I was trying to show in an immediate and imagistic way the changes and alienation that take place in a character who has relocated to Calgary.

Rosemary placed my story last on the evening's agenda. Bill wasn't in class and I was bummed, feared he disliked this story and couldn't face me in class. They started in on my story and in walked Bill at the last minute, looking exactly like a defense lawyer entering the court room! This could not have pleased Rosemary.

Most of the class's comments were good. I was stunned by Wendy Adams's reaction. She said, "Wow. It's fascinating a brilliant. I want to be Robin's (my character) friend. Do you have her phone number?" I was thrilled because Wendy is young and bright, a little on the precocious side. She is also a very good critic and not always diplomatic. I was dreading her response.

Then Bill spoke up, looking and sounding like my counsel! He started by making a preliminary statement about it being an important story; corporate relocations are what people are facing now and the alienation of the character "is dead on the mark." He went through the story, talked about the beauty, originality and craft of the language and read sentences he particularly liked in a powerful passionate voice. I was overwhelmed.

So was poor Rosemary. I am sure she felt attacked on some level and she bristled like a little rooster. She wheeled around, launched into a diatribe about how work had to be criticized, "you can't send half-done or mediocre stories to editors or you'd be black-balled for life." Then she said, "I am so sick and tired of stories written by easterners that bash Calgary." I had not set out to bash Calgary. Calgary, as a particular place, wasn't even all that important. This character would be in the same state of seismic change wherever she had been relocated. No one else in the class saw it Rosemary's way. She was almost pathetic, trying to piggy-back on to anyone who had any vague criticism to make.

Bill rushed to my defense again and said it had nothing to do with disliking Calgary. He compared the story favourably to Margaret Atwood and said I had written a powerful story "that has nothing to do with Canlit or symbolism." This made Rosemary even more defensive. The class turned into *the Jerry Springer Show*. I half expected people to hump out of their seats and start swinging punches, overturning the chairs etc.

Comme toujours Bill gave me a ride home. I've come to enjoy these rides home with Bill. I like his combination of folksiness and worldliness. He's from a small town in northern Manitoba and I like the working class roots that still show. He is sharp, sensitive and emotional. He is also very interested in spirituality. Last week he mentioned a Thomas More book that I want to read now. We mostly talk about the class, our work, and it was clear he thought Rosemary completely missed the point.

After returning home, Rosemary's reaction and her unprofessionalism (even more than her words) rankled me and I couldn't sleep. When I finally did drift off I dreamed about the class but that Margaret Atwood was teaching it. She told me to stop writing and said, "My advice to you is join the demolition derby. It's safer for you than writing."

### **March 17**

Big gorgeous eastern snowstorm. Just like the ones I used to know ... By the time I got off the no 10 the world was white, trees outlined in snow. Snowed all night and into the morning. The city had ground to a halt. Buses couldn't make it up some of the hills. Only a few paths stamped out through the drifts. I trekked to the LRT in this Siberian landscape, everyone marching single-file down the footpaths.

Arrived at work just a little later than usual. Discovered I was the only one besides Debbie-Lyne and the BIS group who showed up. Jennifer, Mary Helen and I went to the James Joyce to celebrate St Patrick's Day, and reward ourselves for going to work. The pub was so crowded it was like being inside a Picasso painting: a bombardment of shapes, angles, distorted perspectives, features cut out of context, collages of dialogue.

## **March 18**

Everyone managed to find their way back to the office today. How did all those people know not to come in yesterday? Do they all call each other? Signals from hilltops? There are times when I truly sympathize with the newbies hired in Calgary! Had a pleasant surprise this morning though. Bill Fric called and invited me out for lunch. He picked me up at noon in front of GCS and took me to Santorini's, a pleasant Greek restaurant on Centre Street. We crossed the bridge past the stone lions and for me it felt like crossing the Rubicon. I am rarely in this part of the city and the Bow River looked windswept and desolate. The wind has created hoodoos of snow.

This is one of Bill's favourite restaurants because it gets him out of downtown. He's a regular, knew exactly what to order. We talked about travelling and I tried describing Prague and why I found it so special. Bill is so easy to talk to. In some of his views he's very much a conservative businessman like any number of those 45-50 year-old guys at CPR. I have to admit though, starting in as a new hire in a "mature" organization like CP makes me feel as if I'm a lot younger than I really am. Bill is always so interested in our CP goings-on. From his perspective, it's as if the CPR has rolled into town along with an old-fashioned way of doing business, lunches, bars, going out after work. He said that after the oil bust in the 1980s Calgary businesses became very puritannical, and stopped doing business like that. Now the railway has come to town doing it.

Bill is fascinated by spirituality. He is working on a novel dealing with spiritual issues. He's a voracious reader and has mentioned a book by Thomas More on the soul. Yet he is almost as fascinated by the corporate world as I am, always asking me about my work at CPR. He used to work as a corporate lawyer in the GPS building. He knows Laura Sugimoto and through his law work, how cautious and conservative the CPR is.

He said he bought shares in CP because of the restructuring and downsizing. Yet as a lawyer he knows these events devastate people. It's the first time I've ever encountered the shareholder's view of life through a friend and not as corporate propaganda or an ominous threat to my job. We ranged through so many topics of conversation. I mentioned seeing *Good Will Hunting* and was thrilled to find out he loved the movie as much as I did. I know he's also from a working class background. He really wants his seventeen year-old son to see it but can't be the one to suggest it. "He'd never go to a movie recommended by his father."

#### **April 20**

Fred's Oma died today. She passed away in her sleep early this morning, just after her 98<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Flight arrangements. Race to the passport office, search for a cat-sitter, preparations at work, finding out how many vacation days I have, etc. In the midst of all this, Bill called me at work. He loved the silly Sam Slade spoof I had written for the class. He asked me how long it took me to write it. When I told him it was just a fun piece for the end of the class he said, "I've suspected it for a long time but I'm sure now that you're an awesome writer!" He wants me to keep sending him my writing even though we're not taking the next class with Rosemary.

#### **April 21-22**

Flight from Calgary to Heathrow. Eight and a half hours of captivity. At Heathrow we had to take a shuttle 'bus to the other side of the airport. Interesting to experience everyone driving on the wrong side of the road. The first vehicles that came around the corner made me cover my eyes, certain we'd end up in a collision. Made the connection to our next flight: London to Brussels via British Airways. Picked up a rental car. Dutch and French at the Avis counter. Have really missed this kind of interchange between languages.

Drove from Brussels to Zundert, NL. Zundert is a small town near the Belgian border of winding cobblestones streets, sharp corners, labyrinths. Brick A-frames with their ubiquitous orange tile roofs, tall shining windows. Interesting mixture of the domestic and exotic. The exoticism comes from the tropical beauty of the gardens here. There are flowers and trees here that I haven't seen since Florida. Literally down the garden path to Fred's Aunt Narda and Uncle Ate Bouten's house.

They seemed old and isolated like Simenon characters, sitting at their dining room table, smoking and drinking gin from tiny glasses. They keep the gin bottle on the floor and constantly bring it up to the table to refill those tiny glasses. No lights, no music, no TV, just a little twilight world where they are completely dependent on and in collusion with each other. Both in bad health but Ate looks really ill. I wonder what will become of Narda when he dies.

Narda bears a superficial resemblance to Oma. She is trim and well-dressed with a stylish short cut. But her expression is much different from Oma's. There's no mischief there. She looks as if all bad things happen to her and she has such a cross to bear. She is much quicker and sharper-tongued than Marria (Marja). The two sisters are so very different.

From there Fred and I went on to Braaschast, Belgium, where we spent the night with Narda and Ate's son Jan and his wife, Monika. Jan is a "klokkenspecialist." He has a store where he fixes and sells antique clocks. Only in Europe could you have a business doing that. Their house is in back of the store. Very cool. We went in through the store entrance, past ancient clocks slumbering on the walls, clocks frozen at the midnight hour, clocks that go back to the flood. Clocks that encompass time, space, history and memory. Clocks meant to be inheritances, legacies, rather than mechanical time-pieces.

We climbed two flights of wooden stairs to get to our bedroom on the top floor. Reminded me of our wonderful hotels in Amsterdam and Rouen. Two tiny twin beds pushed together. Very tired; jet-lagged. It wasn't until morning that I saw what a wonderful house they have with the staircases. Beautiful green courtyard garden. I wish I could live here so much.

## April 23

Courtyard brunch with Jan and Monika. Fred and I then walked through a park and came upon a great brick archway, which led to druidic trees, sacred groves, holly twisting around the branches, a lake in the centre. Lady-of-the-lake, Camelot, Merlin – it was that kind of lake. Trees with green bark and eyes, the kind that walk around in the night. I so wish I could live here among the ancient trees, take a walk and just happen upon an archway, a castle, an archeological dig.

Back to Zundert to pick up the Valkyrie at the Boutens' house. Drove to Oma's apartments in the Hague. First night of the visitations. After the beautiful park this morning, Fred's mother was napalm to my soul. Bellowing, interrupting, arguing with everyone over any stupid thing. The apartment building looked like a motel. A concierge/busybody sat at a desk in the lobby and inspected us as we trooped by. Both flats full of Oma's life, all her souvenirs, papers, antiques, great wooden tables and cabinets. I recognized the statue of the weeping girl with the watering can, the scarlet chandelier from the Eefde lobby, and the huge lamp from the living room. Wonderful rooftop view of the Hague. Orange tiles, attics, chimney pots, weathervanes, church spires. Also felt wonderful to be in a real city again. Long city blocks surrounding Oma's apartment reminded me of NDG.

Fred's Aunt Lynn and cousin Carol arrived. Always nice to see Lynn. Carol is Carol. She is a presence with her mane of dark hair and amber eyes. She is always pursing her lips now and this has become her normal expression. It wouldn't surprise me to find out she started doing it on purpose to look as if she was pondering something important. I learned a long time ago that family is everything to Carol, blood-family, that is, and if you're not a van der Harst you're meaningless to her. It doesn't bother me as I rarely see her but I refuse to fake a relationship with her. She so badly wants to be Oma, the grande dame, yet is so American with her positive thinking and platitudes about "wellness."

Lynn has much more depth and intelligence than Carol. We share jokes and stories. There's a lot of competition between her and Carol. There is a lot of friction and competition between all the women in that family; Oma-Marja (the template), Marja-Narda, Lynn-Carol, Carol-Debbie.

Lynn and I had all kinds of in-jokes and catchphrases. “Everything is difficult here if not impossible.” “Difficult” and “impossible” became catchwords for us. She never learned, or tried to learn Dutch. Carol pretends and bluffs. Lynn had apparently made a faux pas at a family gathering before we arrived. She thanked some family members for coming and they backed away from her in embarrassment. Narda’s daughter Enna later explained to Lynn that she shouldn’t have thanked them for coming, this just isn’t done. Lynn and I added that to our repertoire of cultural faux-pas. Many of the artifacts in Oma’s apartments were given name tags, but Narda and Ata pronounced that nothing in the apartments could be disturbed. Lynn and Carol weren’t even allowed to take a photo album full of pictures of their father (Oma’s son John) back to Michigan with them in the suitcase.

It’s too bad Carol can’t relax a little and join in the jokes but she fits into the humorless side of the family. Instead she postured shamelessly over her “knowledge” of Dutch and being a doctor. The family used her as an arranger, organizer and mediator. I also noticed, snob that she is, was attentive to Fred only until Rudolf and Hélène arrived. After that she had eyes only for her European cousin, staying close to his side, looking up at him with the Nancy Reagan gaze.

First night of visitations. We walked from the apartments to the funeral parlour. Blossoms twinkling like stars in the drizzle. Green canal. Parks gleaming in the heart of the city. All around me turrets, gables, shutters, attics. Tall lead-paned windows, glass heavy as ice slabs. Light reflected off the canal, shimmered across the windows. The parlour was supposed to be No 7 on a long street. We found No 7 and pulled the bell. No answer. We peered through the big window and saw people sitting at their dinner table. A man finally came to the door, pointed us down a fork off the road from where we had come. Then he laughed and said people were always showing up at his place for funerals. We thanked him for the information – and his good humour.

A rubbery funeral director. Funeral parlour pretty much the same as in Canada, only without kleenex boxes. No luxuries like that anywhere. The same small brittle chairs. Shook hands like a politicians’s wife, “frau of Fred.” After the visitation ended, around nine pm, we went to a seafood restaurant. Just before we entered Jan invited Fred, Carol, Lynn and me to return to his place to spend the night if we needed.



After dinner, we dropped Carol and Lynn off at the apartments, then Fred and I drove Marria to Narda and Ate's in Zundert. We were going to take Jan up on his invitation as it is such a cool house – and no cigarette smoke. Well, the best-laid plans. All hell broke loose. Marria went into the house with her luggage and before we could leave a fight broke out at the door. Narda was yelling at Marria. Visibly shaken, Marria came out to the car to tell us we all had to stay at Narda and Ate's. N and A pronounced it too late to go to Jan's for the night. Fred and I were ushered to an upstairs bedroom where the door locked on the inside and hooked up to an alarm system! It seemed Narda and Ate had been sitting at their table all night drinking their tiny glasses of straight gin, smoking cigarette after cigarette, working themselves into an alcoholic rage while the rest of us were out for dinner.

Narda and Marria continued brawling. Fred went downstairs and told them to keep it down as we were trying to sleep. As usual, he let himself get pulled into the fight and started arguing with Narda and Ate, then lost his temper. He yelled up the stairs at me to get dressed. We were leaving, either finding a hotel or sleeping in the car. We packed and dressed and moved our luggage down the stairs. Marria was sitting at the table in her nightgown and looked like she was having the time of her life over us leaving and rebelling against her sister.

It was after midnight when we drove off. Zundert was dark, locked up, grills rolled down over the windows. It looked like an occupied town after curfew. Nothing more dead to the world than a town in the Dutch countryside after hours. No all-night gas stations of 7-11s. A hotel bar on main street was open, people lounging at the counter, music, the “oranjeboom” sign was lit up. But the hotel was full and we drove into Belgium.

We passed the building that looks like a concrete bunker with Club X written on the side. Innumerable brown brick houses with barns attached to them. Lace curtains, painted shutters, all dark and utterly self-contained. We drove on into Antwerp Centrum. Two in the morning. Cobblestones blue and iridescent as oyster shells. Rain-darkened stone buildings with statues in their niches. Piazza lined with cherubim, their drowned faces looking out over the titling building. Crooked lead-paned windows, golden weathercocks interspersed with ominous multinational offices and banks. Barclay's Bank: “Are you ready for the Euro? We are.”

Pubs still open, people staggering through the square. Parisien-style cabarets. Finally at around 3:30, we checked the last hotel in Antwerp. It had a room! Someone hadn't shown up for a reservation. Tall narrow building with a tiny life to the room. Heavy drapes, a sink and tiny shower in the room, toilet down the hall. Reminded me a little of the Hotel Amsterdam in San Francisco. This turned into a real caper.

Returned to Narda and Ate's the next afternoon to pick up Marria and return to the Hague. She was standing outside the house with her luggage piled up at the garage. We weren't sure if she had been kicked out or was standing outside on principle, but we picked her up and returned to Oma's apartments. According to the Valkyrie, Narda and Ate were both so drunk Narda passed out and Ate fell. The Valkyrie tried helping him to bed and discovered blood on the back of his head. She said she didn't do anything because she didn't know the Netherlands equivalent to 9-11. When N and A finally woke up, neither of them remembered the fall and didn't know where the blood came from. They claimed alcohol has nothing to do with their troubles – which are all caused by bad nerves. "Oma's death has been so difficult ...." When Lynn and Carol heard the story, they called Narda to calm her down and then persuaded Marria to talk with her sister. I was shocked by Marria's belligerence.

Fred, Carol and I found a funky café-bar around the corner. Out the window, a bicycle traffic jam. Fred's cousins Enna and Rudolf passed by the window, walking Enna's dog. Enna was clearly upset. Carol filled us in. Enna's mother, Narda, had called to tell her side of the story. No one called Enna later to tell her Narda and Marja had made up later that afternoon and were no longer at each other's throats. We all agreed Enna should never have been involved in the first place.

Second visitation night. We turned up on time at the right address and I stood smiled and shook hands as outsider "frau." Bouquets of flowers lined the room, so many different arrangements from different groups and so very formal. By far the nicest was Enna's little handpicked bouquet of wildflowers from Eefde. Those made me cry.

The Valkyrie was still feeling rebellious. A never-ending sister rivalry there. To punish Narda and Ate, she refused to stay with them and reserved rooms for the three of us at the posh Green Park Hotel, part of the Golden Tulip chain. I teased her by saying, “It looks like you’re on the side of the North American black sheep.” She agreed with gusto and said she was North American and not Dutch at all, she didn’t in any way identify with the country. Then she said, “Narda and Ate decided they’re old. I have decided I’m rich.” She said that with such comical defiance. The hotel was beautiful, situated on a lake, a floating island. The room was similar to my room at the Calgary Best Western but the location was incredible. Sat out on the balcony, over the water. Leaves blurred into cloud. Ducks and fish just beneath the surface of the lake. The kind of mysterious, cloudy, dissolving twilight I haven’t seen since moving to Calgary.

#### **April 25**

The funeral was a simple civil service held in a crematorium located in a lovely green wood. Everyone met at the funeral parlour and then separated into groups. Fred and I didn’t rate a limousine ride but Narda and Ate’s gardener, Joseph, drove us out in his car, navigating the corners of the Hague. He played chauffeur, had us sit in the back, opened doors and escorted us. He was kind and fun. I wonder if he had heard about the brouhaha and had some sympathy for us.

A few people spoke, some only in Dutch. Lynn, Carol, Rudolf and Marria were among those who spoke. The speeches revealed more about the speakers than Oma. Lynn’s face took on a beatific sincerity when she talked about “Mother,” and she managed to work in a Bible passage at the end of her speech. Carol spoke of Oma as being her inspiration, then spent the rest of the time talking about herself and how doctors are geniuses. Just as Lynn slipped in her religion, Carol talked about her career in medicine. Enna sat between her parents, in tears. She seems to be the family care-giver and I get the feeling she is often taken for granted.

After the service we trooped into a reception room and mingled. I didn't feel anything until I looked out and saw a walled garden, new leaves, blooming trees. Then I could picture Oma in her garden in Eefde. For the first time her death felt real to me and I almost lost it in the reception room. The matriarch has died and it will be interesting to see how (if) the family reshapes, if the grandchildren will maintain connections. I noticed no one monopolized the funeral. No one person "owned" the funeral, no one had to be tiptoed around and placated at every turn. Everyone seemed to have had a special relationship with Oma from her daughters, grandchildren, old and new friends, caregivers. It was the most egalitarian funeral I've ever attended. No black widows, iron mamas, grief mavens, etc. I had my special moments with her and didn't feel at all out of place.

Fred, me, the Valkyrie, Narda, Ate and Joseph went to see the Indonesian Second World War memorial where Oma's flowers were taken as per her request. Back to N and A's house in Zundert for the night as if nothing had happened. Families baffle me so much. Managed to get out for a walk to look at the beautiful gardens, the little zig-zag streets. Monkey puzzle trees! Called monkey trees here. Their real name is araucaria and it's a South American tree, originally found in the Brazilian rain forest. They look so fantastical and prehistoric. Fred, the Valkyrie and me went to a restaurant on the NL/Belgium border, right across the street from the Club X bunker. I'm not sure if Narda and Ate ever eat.

## **April 26**

Headed off to Domburg with the Valkyrie. Reached the family house with its brown brick, red and white shutters, a two-story European cottage with a narrow twisting staircase. Domburg is a resort town in the province of Zeeland on the North Sea. Crowded with tourists, especially Germans. The town has existed since Roman times. After the Romans came Frankish and Anglo Saxon settlements. When a section of the dunes eroded in 1647, the floor of a temple and some statues were discovered. Always a resort town, hang-out for artists and the wealthy. Piet Mondriaan stayed there in 1908. The van der Harst house is the smallest and plainest on the street.

Domburg is small but I could have walked around it all day, maybe even forever. Every brick road leads to another, a labyrinth of winding alleys and narrow streets, some dead-heading at private property and some leading back to another public thoroughfare. Hard to tell backyards from parks. So lush here. Ivies spray over brick walls like sea surf. Of course the crowning touch of a lovely day was the walk from the Domburg house up to the dunes and down to the beach. There I wrote my own tribute to Oma.

“Here among the beautiful gardens, flowers and trees I can finally sit down and quiet my soul enough to think of you, to feel your presence. I am surrounded by birdsong, the throb of doves, tender tropical flowers and sprays of blooms. You were nowhere to be found in the endless yackety-yak of the funeral parlour. I can sense you, and your birth country, Indonesia, in this European country by the sea, sunken in its lush spring growth.

“I never saw as much of you as everyone else here did, but the times I did get to spend with you were always meaningful. I have my Oma-moments too and although here I have no voice or identity, this is my voice now. You were the first person who welcomed me into the family, who touched me, put your arm around me and whispered ‘I love you’ in my ear. I was not welcomed by anyone else in Fred’s entire family. I realize you may have only been playing family politics by siding with the black sheep to get a rise out of the family, especially Marria, but that has never bothered me. You were always ambiguous, a trickster figure.

“You were terrified of death and spent a lifetime trying to find answers. You tried to do it by studying, taking notes, by seeing everything you could of the world. Exploring; countries, peoples, religions. None of which satisfied your seeking spirit, or the melancholy that lurked just below your teasing, willful surface. None of it could provide the answers or certainty you sought so hard. Did you accept it in the end? I’d like to think so, because your death was a typical Oma trick. You were surrounded by friends and family but you managed to slip away when no one was looking; out to your hidden garden.

“I imagine you here in Domburg, walking up the path, shells crackling underfoot, luminous moonlight, looking up at the mysterious water tower. Did you ever do as I’m doing now, imagining Galileo on top of the tower with his telescope seeing constellations in a deep 16<sup>th</sup> Century sky?

“And when you made it to the top of the dunes and looked out over the North Sea were you as awed as I am now by the vastness of the sea and how the ships appear like galleons in mist? I wish I could ask you what it’s like, where you are now. I wish I could believe your being lives on and you are seeing a new world the way I’m seeing Domburg tonight. With your same seeking restless mind, you probably still need to get to the bottom of it all, to know. Somewhere you’ve picked up a telephone and imperiously ordered a young man to bring around a car with your old mixture of entitlement and self-deprecation. Such a complex, contradictory and fascinating woman and I will really miss you.”

#### **April 27**

Fred and I escaped the Valkyrie and had coffee in Domburg, then the three of us went to Middelburg. Fred’s mother has gone beyond Valkyrie-ism. She is now a full-blown ogre. Fee fie fo fum, where is my boelissen? Green and pleasant countryside, radio tower buried in foliage, red-gold pheasants, signs advertising a “snuffelmarket.” Fred steered the Open through roundabouts into villages. Such a domestic country, a network of villages and suburbs strung across Zeeland. Nothing anywhere near as remote or isolated as a small town in Alberta. Here, no separation between cities, farmlands and farms. Horses, cows and sheep in the towns. Lambing. Black and white lambs. Dates, e.g., 1831, on roofs like street address numbers.

Impossible for me to see Middelburg as a small city of 40,000 people. The Middelburg town hall was built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> Century when English, Scottish, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese merchants converged here. The town is the oldest in Zeeland, granted town rights in 1217. It seems ancient with its medieval abbey and late Gothic town hall. Office buildings are mostly outside the old town centrum. Apparently much of it was reconstructed after WWII. After Rotterdam was bombed, the Netherlands capitulated – except for the province of Zeeland. However, Middelburg is Zeeland’s capital and when it was bombed on 17 May 1940 (to be exact) the fight ended.

Crooked windows, buildings swooning into each other. Great wooden shutters with brocade drapery. Brick worn to volcanic ash. To me only a few areas looked re-built. Sequestered alleyways, eroded houses steeped in dark foliage, many shuttered, some alive with orange light. Lanterns reveal so many types of brick. Flowering wisteria, honeysuckle, lilacs almost past their prime. Some moss-covered shutters looking as if they've never cracked open. Spiders spinning in the stone arches of the church tower. A dark narrow alley where flowers erupt in cracked stones. Sloped houses, plaster blistering from the moldering brick beneath. Dormer windows pointing toward the canal.

A spire cut like the prow of a large ship. Pigeons and doves slipping into the brickwork of the church. Swallow diving into the laneway, tiny tuning forks in the sky. The wind gathered force. Merchants started pulling their wares into the cavern-like shops. Within minutes the town was closed tight, windswept, debris scuttling across the now desolate public square. A few grannies in traditional costumes near the town hall. Some offices and software companies concealed in ancient facades. Walked dreamily into an "antiek" store by the canal. Heavy drapes, sun-drenched and motionless, hung from the windows. Wallpaper revealing a tide mark of rising damp from the ground outside. Filigreed photo frames crowded a mantelpiece. Blue and white tiles featured homey drawings of windmills and women wearing traditional clothing.

Continued driving. Stopped in Koudekerke so Marria could see her grandfather's house, the famous country doctor, Jan Jacobus van der Harst is a near mythical figure to that family. A row of elms lined a road reaching all the way to the shimmering sea. Westkapelle snug around a dike overlooking the North Sea. An old church dominates a group of brown brick houses with the orange-tiled roofs. Cobblestone streets, a few manor houses, a castle on the outskirts of the village.

On the dike there is a restaurant where you can watch the sea and the ships, protected from the winds. A lot of dog-walkers. Gardens smell of wild roses and wet leaves. Two-hundred houses with walls a yard thick, gated, moated by gardens. A fountain occasional emerges. Instead of ringing doorbells, here you pull on a bell that sounds like a cowbell. The gate opens and cars crackle up a path of crushed shells. Everywhere in Zeeland crushed shells instead of gravel.

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Vlissingen, a vigorous port town. More commercial, less touristy. Wonderful wooden boats, some shaped like water-borne coffins. Impressive ships evoking the great ports and rivers, the Thames, the Rhine, Liverpool. Centuries of history. Ghost ships, tugboats. Dinner at a pizza place. Climbed up a narrow spiral staircase into an attic-like room, where we looked out onto the public square. Pizzas delivered on motor-scooters with metal boxes affixed to the back.

### **April 29**

Puttered around various cemeteries. Saw Marria's sister Enna's grave in Koudekerke. The original Enna. All the gravestones were Calvinistically plain, all rectangular slabs of stone. "Hier rust Enna van der Harst," birth and death dates, nothing else. Then on to another cemetery to see Dr van der Harst's grave. His was much more prominent with a little wall around it. Coffee in Ostkerke. Drove back through Westkapelle. Stopped at the tower, which had been erected in 1470 and converted in 1811.

The Valkyrie was impossible; nagging, demanding, utterly boorish, the inspiration for generations of mother-in-law jokes. These are all qualities I've never liked in her but they're magnified here a thousand-fold. I wonder if this is her reaction to Oma's death. Having to stay with her in Domburg is like enduring a giant tantrummy two year-old. Her hair has become a shock of white and she really does look like an ogre stumping around on her cane. Fred and I finally escaped. I took a little driving lesson on the Opel, which is standard transmission. Trying to get the clutch right is harrowing. Ended the day with dinner at the beautiful restaurant on the dike. Watched the ships appear in the distance like ghostly galleons then on into infinity.

### **April 30**

The Dutch Queen's birthday. Despite the Valkyrie's assertions that she's not Dutch she spent the day watching the celebrations on TV and completely missed all the people in costumes parading outside the window!



People dressed in orange paraded through Domburg. Orange seems to be the real national colour. Dutch teams wear it in the Olympics. Orange streamers everywhere. Red, white and blue seem to be the colours of the flag only. Purim-style costumes! Some women in tradition costumes with gold “peyos” in their hair. Fred and I went to Middelburg to see the Ringrijden held in the market square. It’s like a joust, only the riders had to pick off a brass ring with their lances. They rode Clydesdale-like horses with shaggy hooves. The winner picked off a one centimeter ring.

### **May 1**

Left the island of Walcheren. To Vrouwenpolder. We drove along a dike, which enraged the Valkyrie. It turns out that she’s afraid of being that close to the sea but she never told us that. Instead we were subjected to a full-scale tantrum. I so wished I could have gone alone. The ghostly drift of the ships along the North Sea, which battered the dike. Bleak coastal day. I could imagine this place during a storm. Hallucinations in the fog. Everything reversed, trees rooted in the sky, birds flying under the water, kings wading in the fog, moving castles. Stone statues wandering into the sea. A derelict windmill in a vaporous field. Back on terra firma we discovered a working windmill, which placated the Valkyrie. We were able to go inside and climb ladders. Work was being done on the old brick house, ancient beams holding the roof in place. Land a thin green skin barely covering water, fields a dusky rose grading to maroon.

Afternoon of winding cobblestoned streets in Zierikzee. Patina of damp everywhere, alleys steaming with foliage. Lanterns lunging like figureheads from blind corners. I felt like an amphibian in an amphibious land. Crooked buildings leaning on each other. All the people we saw coming in and out of them looked too large to fit inside. Wooden shutters, great blooming hinges and latches. Hooks on the roofs. Some buildings looked stern and whitewashed. These dated back to the 1600s. Narrow buildings with enlarged facades to make them look wider. They may be narrow but go back and back and back with staircase that twist up and up, many without railings.

On to Veere, a medieval sea town. Reminded me of Micanopy Florida, in that it was so peaceful and such a typical representation of a medieval sea town it seemed like a movie set. Descended into an old coal cellar, which had become a restaurant. It was like being inside a brick oven – or in a whale’s belly. Outside, a terrasse, shutters open like tabs on an Advent calendar. A pair of worn klompen by the water closet

Another beautiful night walk to the dunes. Standing by the sea, listening to the long roar of dark water, the luminous sand. The moon drifted over the roofs of Domburg, the water tower as primeval and archetypal as Tarot card symbol. Ships approaching so close and then dissolving into the sea. Liquid air, liquid land. Beach streaked with shivering foam, translucent jellyfish. My hair was wet, streaked with salt. I wanted to stay here for the rest of my life.

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Fed and I sneaked off to Zierikzee and Middelburg in the morning. Valkyrie in a great rage over our defection. We went to a flea market and returned to Vlissingen for pizza. This placated the old buzzard and we had a good night.

### **May 3**

Returned to Narda and Ate’s in Zundert. Vacation over. We joked about being the prisoners of Zundert. The afternoon passed pleasantly, though. Had a chance to see how Narda and Ate live and how their family interacts. I was also able to visit with Enna for the first time. She was cheerful and hearty, sporty even, and I found her bright, interesting and insightful. Fred and I went on a dog-walk with her. Her English is excellent and she reads a lot of British books, even knows the difference between Canadian and British English. She is also a big fan of the British sitcom, *Keeping Up Appearances* and we joked about Marria being like Hyacinth Bucket with her backseat driving. “Richard, mind the pedestrian!” Enna said she comes from a teasing family and that Marria’s whole branch wasn’t like that. Only Fred seems to have some of that playful teasing quality.

Also saw some more of the dynamic between those two sisters, Marja and Narda. Marja so bellicose and lacking in wit or irony. Narda full of wit and irony. Ate too. Both of them shot out hundreds of little barbs at Marja, who either doesn't get them at all, or can't be deflected from her very serious *idée fixes* to enjoy any kind of playful banter. Peaceful family dinner at Marria's "biefstuk" restaurant on the Belgian border.

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Five and a half hour flight from Heathrow to Calgary. Pure torture, especially since I really did not want to return. Spectacular view of glaciers, ice caps over Greenland, however, a polar world beneath me. Back in Calgary. Dry, dry, dry. The earth in the garden was like powder. At night I smelled smoke through the bedroom window, some kind of unpleasant wood smoke. It turned out that while we were on the North Sea, Alberta was burning with forest fires. The people in the town of Swan Hills had to be evacuated and the wind was carrying the smoke into Calgary. It couldn't have been a more disorienting return.

## **May 25**

A ghost from Windsor Station! Malcolm Cairns was in town and it was a typical encounter. I was hanging out with Mary Helen and Jennifer in BIS when he came in and made a beeline over to me. Apparently someone had taken his phone and replaced his laptop with something he couldn't use. He also couldn't find his department as we are all being reshuffled to different floors. CPR has taken yet more floors of the Gulf Canada building. Perpetual smell of carpet glue and wood dust. 1800 people now in the building. He managed to find BIS where he could contact his department. A little later we ended up in the elevator together and he asked me how I've adjusted to Calgary. He remembered I wasn't in BIS any more and had "crossed the floor." He said it was good to see me as the elevator door opened. Seeing him made me feel nostalgic for Windsor Station.

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Another encounter with a former client. Henry Kerkhoven was on it going to the 19<sup>th</sup> floor. He always greets me, remembers my name from Windsor Station days. He asked me when my next article was coming out. I said I was swamped with other work and didn't know. He said my pieces were worthwhile reading and hoped it would be soon. Later Dave says my experimental project management piece is good and he is giving it a back-page feature spread. John Flood, the project management honcho is also pleased, said the article is "insightful and balanced." So I guess Henry K will see a new article fairly soon.

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Saw Michael Moore's *The Big One* and was thoroughly depressed by it. I came out thinking the whole world is corrupt, if not insane; there is no such thing as living free, without being trapped in some kind of system. Moore is a great champion of the working class. He does it through satire and parody. This documentary, done in a "film-verité style, follows Moore on his tour promoting his new book called, *Downsize This! Random Threats form an Unarmed American*. Moore is filmed giving his publicists the slip. He chats with Garrison Keillor about the alienating experience of book tours and then interviews a sociopathic ex-con who explains how reservations for TWA flights are handled by prison labour.

Moore and his cameras invade the lobbies of corporations where he demands to talk to CEOs and presents parodies of the giant cheques companies make out to charitable foundations. Moore is shooed away by security, stonewalled by public relations flacks. Almost every company flack told Moore the same thing when he accused them of making a profit and laying off hundreds of employees, "new global economy, have to be more competitive, have to answer to shareholders ..." The same words coming from every single corporation. It also shows that even corporations, these bastions of power, don't feel they have any power. Kind of fascinating. Those speckless suits in gleaming lobbies perceive themselves as no more secure than the downsized people outside the candy factory. If nothing else, Moore's film is a great example of guerrilla theatre.

Moore actually got an audience with Nike CEO, Phil Knight. I don't agree with Knight's view on life, but at least he had the guts to go on camera and tell Moore he didn't think a lot of the unemployed people outside the gates wanted the jobs he could offer.

Circling back to the book promotions tour, Moore also met with a group of Borders bookstore employees under cover of night – an *X-Files* scene. They tell him of secret plans to hold a vote to establish a union. Since Moore was visiting several Borders stores on his own book tour there was an interesting tension between his appearance as “author” and his sympathies toward the part-time employees, who were forbidden by the bookstores’ management to attend Michael Moore’s readings!

Moore genuinely seems to be a populist, using wit, ridicule and street theatre to expose the mighty. I left the theatre feeling two things at once. Energized, wanting to march in to the streets and help people form unions. Also thoroughly depressed knowing I’d be back in my weird little corporate eyrie on Monday morning. The only criticism I have is that Moore is so clearly in charge, so much the star. He is in the shining lobbies whereas the “little people” remain in the parking lots. In a way he often makes it seem as if they are helpless without him.

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Saw *The Truman Show* with Mary Helen and Jennifer. Another thought-provoking movie. Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey), a man in his early 30s, has never left his little island town of Seahaven and doesn’t it is actually a huge set under an artificial sky and he has grown up inside an enormous studio filled with thousands of concealed cameras. He has a perfect marriage to “Meryl,” and his best friend is “Marlon.” He has a “job” as an insurance salesman. Reality conceived and orchestrated by a TV producer named Christof. A little like the corporations in *The Big One*. A completely controlled, circumscribed life.

Everything Truman has experienced since his birth, from “family tragedy” to the “spontaneous” incident when he meets his future wife has been scripted, fleshed out by actors and viewed by a worldwide audience. The few times Truman has acted on spontaneous feeling – his youthful courtship of a girl Christof doesn’t approve on – his sin is exploited as drama. He is robbed of all self-determination. But Truman, prompted by the woman he’s never really forgotten, suspects something is wrong.

One day Truman goes missing and the images become more surreal, the story more mythic. Christof (Christ?), like an enraged deity, manufactures storms and swollen seas in the mock Earth studio. The painted moon and sunsets are deliciously, sensually fake and I love the homage to Georges Méliès. The third act of the movie culminates in a dreamy vision strongly resembling a Magritte painting, and goes far beyond being another self-referential media satire.

So many questions. How much of our lives is predestined? How much free will does any of us really have? Is Christof a possessive god? Truman an Adam who needs to leave paradise? His girlfriend, the catalyst, is Eve? Layers on layers. In terms of the big questions, this movie is everything *Contact* wasn't.

## June 19

Out to Lake Chestermere with Fred. This is a real lake, just outside Calgary with docks, boats. Furtive smell of water. Fred is working an RV convention with his ham radio mates and I came along for the ride. Row upon row of RVs, tiny windows glowing light. Foggy, a diffuse murky light perfect for secrecy, conspiracy. Crossed a muddy field to see the ARES trailer. ARES: Amateur Radio Emergency Service. Inside the trailer, maps with coloured pins, radio call signs, codes, log books, radios with hundreds of tiny push buttons, dials, glowing LEDs. Dancing diodes. Signals in the weird night. Contact with who or what, though? This would be the perfect setting for a UFO sighting but I get the feeling these ham radio operators would be extremely offended by my mentioning UFOS.

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Long bike ride along the Elbow River. River swollen and muddy, many trails washed out. Slunk along the bike path through the posh area of Mont Royal. Could see floodwater encroaching up the yards. Cruised into Stanley Park then into another park. A whole secret web of pathways, a hidden geography, the Other Side of Elbow Drive. Reminding me yet again how circumscribed my daily journey through the city. A bike ride can open up new worlds in this city.

## July 7

Meeting in the executive boardroom today. CPR is joining the Responsible Care partnership with the Canadian Chemical Producers Association. Rob Ritchie was there to sign the company's commitment to this initiative and I was there to publicize it. Needless to say, the truly interesting things will never be printed. First of all, the meeting was surreal. It's Stampede Week and everyone wore jeans, bolo ties, some kind of cowboy attire. Ritchie kicked off the meeting, "On the count of three, everyone give a ya-hoo." Much glad-handing, jovial chit-chat. Ritchie shook my hand and introduced himself to me, even though we have met before at the Palliser. I've noticed his eyes are cool and detached when he meets people.

Saw Anne Tennier in action. She presented some of CPR's environmental initiatives. She's impressive; clear, affable, calm. A good speaker. She also projects an air of being comfortable in her position and with herself. She also has a PhD in Engineering. So Ralph is her one weakness? I found her presentation fascinating because the railway has such a huge impact on so many levels; PCBs, asbestos, batteries, "fish habitat sensitive zones and inventory," "timber management," old creosote railway ties, maintenance-of-way hazardous waste disposal. This isn't even a partial list!

Brian Wastle, VP of Responsible Care for the CCPA, was a good speaker, almost evangelical. He talked about the origins of RC, basically a spin for the chemical industry. But his language was vivid and quotable. "No one particularly liked the chemical industry; we had built no bridges with the community. Something profoundly different had to happen, considering how many people hated us." Interesting blend of altruism and self-interest. He said one of the changes RC has brought to the chemical industry is acceptance of research and study results. No CEO screams, "Junk science" any more if they don't get the results they want. For example, a lot of endocrinal research is being conducted these days. Wastle says the chemical industry, because of Responsible Care, will now accept results proving that very low chemical levels can affect the endocrine level.

Then he talked about CPR's partnership, which was really interesting. It seems the railway is being coerced to join by the chemical companies. Chemical companies are important railway customers. CN has been a member for several years now and CP will have to conform to an agenda already set by CN. This is what happens when you don't show initiative. CN outplays every single time. There is an iron fist in the velvet glove of Responsible Care and this came out in some of Brian Wastle's rhetoric. Some veiled threats directed at CP. "There will be issues with carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, the problem of global warming which we will have to work on collectively. Part of your route assessment may involve fish habitat sensitive zones."

Then there was the issue of skeletons in the closet. He said that past practices won't be acceptable today. And he uttered the D-word. "Derailments. You buried cars in the past. Where are they now? How are they impacting the environment? RC could mean breaking off relationships with longtime clients and partners. The true test of a company's commitment to RC." Moments like this could actually make me feel corporations are sincere about cleaning up their acts. I was left with a few questions though. What exactly is "Business Disruption Management?" Anne Tennier referred to it but gave no details. I'm thinking it stands for a word that's almost as forbidden as "Derailment." The word being "Strike."

After Wastle finished speaking the meeting reverted to another great show of collegiality. Rob Ritchie signed the application and said, sounding a touch embarrassed, "We expect to learn a lot to do our job better. RC has the support of CP, it has my support. We look forward to the journey. Forever." Ritchie signed the paper. Applause. Jokes. Then he presented beaver statuettes to the two sponsors. Fred Green then said (of the beavers), "Don't worry. We have boxes. This could go on and on." And I could also go on and on about how it goes on and on at the CPR.



## July 20

Drove to the Banff Centre for the Performing Arts to see Barbara Ehrenreich. She was introduced by Michael Ignatieff. He was in Colin Browne's film, *Father and Son*. He seemed shy, diffident, dressed like a cliché professor. Yet his introduction was so intriguing, a labyrinth of phrases and vivid bon mots. Ehrenreich is working on a manuscript or new ideas, tentatively called "Collective Ecstasy: the Missing Fun in Politics." The collective ecstasy that comes out of involvement in a cause greater than an individual, what happens when you join with a group and blend energies to achieve a goal. I was surprised to learn she originally majored in theology. Some notes:

- Spectacles are now substituted for participatory events. Carnivals have become static parades. Nationalism is often central to the parades that have replaced carnivals. Nuremberg a prime, deadening example. Many have spoken about the Nuremberg rallies as participatory events, whipping a mass into emotional frenzy. Ehrenreich takes an opposing view – the rallies were static, rigid and on a purely spectator level and this is why they were able to hypnotize an audience. Much like TV. These spectacles are made mainstream, easy, efficient and non-- threatening by TV.

- Revival of Halloween as adult form of carnival. Charismatic forms of worship, rock concerts, sports – Stanley Cup riots, etc.

- Ecstasy always exists in a sub rosa way. (First recorded in 1650-60, the term that means "under the rose" from the ancient use of the rose at meetings as a symbol of the sown confidence of the participants, based on the Greek myth that Aphrodite gave a rose to her son Eros, who then gave the rose to Harpocrates, the god of silence and secrets, to ensure Aphrodite's dalliances remained hidden.)

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Night drive back to Calgary. A completely different world. No sight, no instinct. Trying to keep my eyes flickering from mirror to mirror. In a car you're not supposed to see anything, only pick out objects, information. Shadowy mountains. Abruptly steer the car into a curve when your senses are telling you the road goes straight. Menacing truck grills. Can't tell how far away the cars leading or following you really are. All illusion. Headlights dancing like will o'the wisps, road dipping into another space-time continuum.

## July 27

Returned to the Banff Centre, this time to hear Michael Ignatieff speak. He has written eight books and just completed a biography of political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, to be published in October. He's the son of Canadian diplomat, George Ignatieff, grew up all over the world, has degrees from Toronto, Harvard and Cambridge. He lives in London as a freelance writer and produces programs for the BBC. With all these credentials I expected him to be confident, a good public speaker. He was actually delightfully academic. I guess I find that refreshing after spending five days a week in the corporate world. I didn't know anything about Isaiah Berlin before tonight but Ignatieff's talk inspired me.

Ignatieff ducks his head, winces, his face changes expression at the same time he verbally works out a thought. Tentatively strokes his chin. Doesn't focus on anything in the audience – no Toastmasters training – but gazes in the distance, trying to keep his focus on that elusive thought. What the audience hears is not a finished, polished product but is invited along with him on an intellectual journey. His sentences are paths leading to places off the beaten track. A thoughtful, exploratory passion. The topic was Isaiah Berlin and biography and I took a few notes.

- Writers must be able and prepared to deal with the moral implications of some of their material.

- Following a red thread of hatred is a good way through someone's life.

- A biography is a narrative of overcoming difficulty between author (biographer) and subject. Finding a screen of reticence behind a seemingly extraverted character.

- Deep ancient language of command. The Old Testament god addresses this. Rationalist, secular view doesn't address this language or the need for it.

- The work did not come from the life. The work came from somewhere else. The work came from empathy. Biographers make the reductive mistake of assuming the work and the life are the same.

- What, then, is a biography for? Work is something more than a life. It's the imaginative capacity to be different, better, even worse than you are. It gives caution to all reductive approaches to life. Linkage between work and life has to remain supple. Being at home and living in language.

– Braiding identities together, never suppressing one side for the other. Berlin's creativity depended on a skeining. Oppression is tiring. If you have to hold part of yourself down with one hand, you can't put energy into what you're trying to do. Absence of the strain of holding things down.

– Shaping lives. A critical moment is the axis on which a life turns. Feeling all the edges and contour so lacking in our own shapeless lives-in-progress. Some shapes kick you in the face, eg., a career that has ended. Can't keep to that shape known as time.

– Subtext of biography is betrayal. Biographer as hitman. Biography as a murder weapon.

– Memoir is the pathos of shaping something as the dough is rising. Like a good, natural, real photograph, one moment in time. Evanescence. Acknowledgement of the impossibility inherent in memoir is the only way to go with a memoir.

– The fear of creating a pious, plaster saint in Isaiah Berlin while presenting him to the audience.

– At the risk of being pious, I learned to reconnect the intellectual life with pleasure. I couldn't believe how much fun Berlin had with ideas. He talked about ideas as if they were characters in a drama.

– Berlin reminded me of the living continuity of human thought in time. He showed me that it's possible to live a free and joyous life of the mind in this century. And for that, I'll be eternally grateful.

– The living presence of ideas. Effortless access to this tradition. Brighter, cleverer, deeper people have been here before, the sense of miraculous continuity.

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Florida trip to attend the Association of Railway Communicators conference in Longboat Key, Florida, 18-25 Sept. My itinerary:

- Canadian Airlines flight 6244 to Dallas-Fort Worth
- Arrive Dallas-Fort Worth, flight 6791 to Tampa
- Arrive at Tampa, car rental at airport
- Tampa to The Colony at Longboat Key

## Sept. 18

Based on my pratfalls today I could write a book on how not to do a business trip. Fred drove me to the Calgary airport. Made the place from Calgary to Dallas-Fort Worth without drama. Window seat. Vast reaches of quilted land. Striped circles. Rivers like colourless scars. Land puckers into coulees. From up here I can see farmers' fields ending suddenly, opening up to the Underworld. Mountains appeared again when we passed over Colorado. At the Dallas-Ft Worth airport I caught a shuttle train, which reminded me of the Heritage Park train. Followed signs and arrows as if keeping to a footpath in the woods, barely noticing any airport commotion. Fantasized that I do this all the time. Just another biz trip.

The fun began after arriving in Tampa. Walked out of the airport to look around. Square and formal, surrounded by tall elegant palm trees, reminiscent of San Francisco. But the humidity! Air like soup. Ominous, swollen sky. Not even clouds, just a tender fluid grey, a gauze bandage that couldn't stanch the rain. Already wondrous vegetation, deep green leaves in cookie-cutter patterns. Hearts, stars. Clustered and glossy. Flowers deep red and crinkly like crepe. Tiny lizards everywhere. Picked up baggage and took a courtesy van to Thrifty's. They gave me a white Eagle Talon, one of those sporty new cars that look like running shoes. Spent some time figuring out the controls then launched.

Proceeded down 275 South toward Longboat Key. Sky darkening by the second. Lanes appeared and disappeared the way they do in Calgary. Rain began, increased to full on downpour. Noah and the ark cruised by. Lights blurred. Sky and water fusing over the Howard Franklin Bridge. Sliver of land. I was hydroplaning down the Howard Franklin Bridge, "Don't Fear the Reaper" playing on the radio. I had to switch lanes when they disappeared, barely able to see through the spray tossed up from trucks all around me. I was blinded. A long horn. I panicked and turned off at the first exit. I ended up turning a few times too many and missed the sign naming the exit. I didn't even know what city I had turned into.

Dark, teeming rain. Pawn shops, bingo hall, Jehovah's Witnesses kingdom hall, Baptist churches. Tiny houses and huge cars/ Rain bouncing off the pavement. I pulled into a park. Kids running in the rain. Discount stores, all Black and Hispanic. Approached some women huddled under the awing of an old drive-in restaurant, menu prices streaming down the window. I knew I wouldn't be making it to Longboat Key that night. The women directed me to the South City Bingo Hall. I went in, sat down to dry off a little and found out I was in St. Petersburg. Obviously not the tourist or snowbird area.

A woman led me into a ramshackle little bar. Instead of moose heads mounted on the wall this one had a marlin. I asked for water and said I was just waiting for the rain to ease up a little before moving on. Met a woman named Domino. She showed me the new gold filling in her tooth. Her partner collects stuff for the pawn/barter shops. I felt absurd being in this bar on my way to a posh corporate conference. Guilty. Domino's brother-in-law Geoff came in and lay a gun down on the counter. He caught me side-eyeing it and said, "Oh don't pay it no mind. I'm more like to shoot my own foot than anything else."

These kind people treated me like a princess. "A conference!" said Domino. "That's exciting. I never been on a conference."

"Don't know what that is," grumped Jeff.

"What kind of conference?"

"Railway."

They became excited about that. A friend of Ben's father once worked as a porter. Ben asked if I switched the trains on the tracks. Domino scoffed and said, "What do you think? Look at her." They all agreed they could tell I was Canadian, or Northern, from my accent. They were interested in Calgary and knew it was far away. "That's like Dallas," said John with authority. He once worked there.

It was getting late and I needed a place to stay. The rain let up so it was only a downpour. I found the exit for 275 North to Tampa. If worst came to worst I would retrace my trail back to Tampa and start over. An exit appeared. It looked touristy so I took it and chuted into the other side of St Petersburg. Florida has only one thing in common with Calgary: no one is from there. Yet Florida tried hard to evoke a past, some kind of European entitlement with its formal buildings and statues of Ponce de Leon everywhere.

Restaurants and public buildings as symmetrical as Greek temples, palms rising like columns. Bank towers vied with high rise retirement villas for supremacy. Maze of one-way streets, No Parking signs. Drove around in circles. Finally spotted a Hilton, which I had mistaken for a bank. It must have taken me half an hour to get to it by car but eventually I walked into the lobby, drench, lost. There was one room available. The man behind the counter became much more respectful as soon as I extracted my corporate Amex card.

He assumed I was from Montréal and wrote my phone exchange down as 514. It actually took me at least a minute to catch on and correct it to 403. He looked astounded. “Where is that? I’ve never seen that one before.” I said it was a Calgary number. “Oh, the west,” he said. Then I said I used to live in Montréal and almost didn’t correct the 514 number. So within a few hours I went from the South City Bingo Hall to the Hilton. The room was crazy expensive but I was grateful to have it. Took a courtesy van to Wannabee’s downtown, a bar that was still open and serving food. Had a beer and burger at the bar then walked back to the Hilton.

### **Sept. 19**

Not keen on tackling the car again after last night’s wild ride. Sat in a park with coffee for awhile watching lizards pop up to play. Huge blades of grass, scrubby palms. Friendly park cleaner. “Sure is a nice morning to be sitting outside just thinking.” And it really was. Finally ready to head out of St Petersburg. Found 275 South no problem. Motored along. Nice ride, cool and smooth in the Talon, no disappearing lanes to contend with. Across the Skyway Bridge! One of the most thrilling drives I’ve ever done. It seemed to lead straight up into the sky. Drove into clouds. I made it through a tollbooth, got off at the right exit. Bon! Stopped at a gas station, checked the map then proceeded the wrong way down Fruitville Road.

The road was narrow, cracked, curving. Showers interspersed with blinding torrents. Aquarium world. I stopped by the side of the road many times. Serious No Trespassing signs. Old trucks with confederate license plates bombing past me although you couldn't see two feet in front of you.

I was totally sodden after getting out of the car to check a road sign. Passed Cowpen Road. Finally caught on I had taken a wrong turn at Albuquerque when I hit a t-intersection. The sign said Verna Road. I had not mentioned a Verna Road on my crib notes. People continued to splunge past me. No air, only water. Another onslaught of rain and I pulled into a farmer's driveway to wait out the latest fit. Distant headlights. Trees and bushes blurred, melted before my eyes.

Luckily for me, a farmer stopped. He invited me into his truck to look at a map. A gun was lying loose on the front seat. He laughed at my expression. "What are you doing out here in redneck country," he said. I told him I was trying to find Longboat Key. He confirmed I had gone the wrong way, told me to turn back and follow Fruitville Road the other way, straight through. "I've seen people out here before trying to get to Longboat. Not expecting to find themselves in Deliverance Country," he said. I thanked him profusely. "I know where the beaches are," he said. "I'm a former surfer." I would love to know his story – how a surfer ended up in redneck country, driving around in a truck with a gun rattling around on the seat.

Made it to Sarasota. Definitely the right direction. Past Sarasota and into Longboat Key. A sliver of land. Drove and drove until I finally found the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort. It's real. The place is real, the conference is real, I'm real. My name is on their list. They were expecting me last night and it is fabulous, a colony of cottages hidden in lush foliage. Palm trees, ocean roar. White sand, wading birds, pelicans. Ran down to the ocean. The only thing missing was Marsha. I am in Building 6. Light and airy, spacious. I wish I could live in this room. Balcony facing lush, soaked foliage. Found out the bushes with the red crepey flowers are hibiscus.

Informal gathering of ARC members this evening. I trotted off, hoping to meet people. Up the steps to the “Presidential Suite.” First thing I saw was a row of bottles, Smirnoff, Jack Daniels, Seagram. Literally bottled and distilled spirits. But the evening turned out to be delightful. Met the people behind the names listed on all the ARC correspondents. Kris Rabe from NSF, Susan Terpay and Leanne MacGruder from Norfolk Southern, Tim De Paepe from the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen, Marmie Edwards, VP of Operation Lifesaver.

It was networking in the most enjoyable way, completely different from those tortuous writers’ groups and readings. I belonged here, fit right in. We talked about the Conrail acquisition by CSX and CS. This is a subject I know a lot about since I write reports for the VPs about the merger. Received all kinds of inside info on the implementation of the merger. Norfolk Southern’s thoroughbred reputation is a little tarnished. Tim said the FRA is investigating them for safety violations, they aren’t really that much better than CSX or any of the rest of us. They’re able to control publicity better. Tim said the reason NS is on such a high pedestal is because the guys are afraid to report mistakes. They’re not allowed to talk about problems.

Big conflict between CSX and Norfolk Southern over merger implementation dates. Bad morale among the Conrail employees kept on. Officials from one company can’t even enter the other’s territory without signing a contract. Fascinating to hear personal details about this merger I’ve written so much about. And what a glimpse into the business world in general. What a scene - shooting the breeze about Conrail, barefoot on a balcony, holding a cold drink, feeling ocean spray on my face. The ocean roared, hunkered down, reared up, darkening by the second. Shining sand. The group of us drove to a restaurant in St Armand for a late dinner. Susan Terpay said she had read “Lesley’s Excellent Adventures” in *the CPR News* and really liked it. I think I could get used to conference life!



## Sept. 20

As soon as the rain stopped I went for a long walk along the beach. I watched a wading bird spear a minnow. Wild palms, profusion of scalloped-edged leaves, biggest runner of morning glories I've ever seen. Lunched with Marmie from Operation Lifesaver on the bistro terrace. Sun came out and so did the heat. I registered for the conference. Men in khaki shorts and pit helmets opened the doors of the Colony registration building. Then changed into my bathing suit and played in the ocean. Taste of salt, ground moving underfoot, moving backwards, waves crashing into me, delirious obliteration. Water picking me up, pushing me back to shore. It just picks you up, takes you long, then discards you again.

Such great conversations at the reception. Interesting talk with Susan Terpay about relationships. Everyone here has been relocated with a railway some time or another. I'm the junior member of the Relocation Club. Interesting to see how many of my experiences and impressions are shared by others. Met John Prescott from Union Pacific. We compared Calgary to Omaha, Nebraska, where he's based. He was a TV reporter before joining the railway. We talked about the ruralness of Alberta and Nebraska, how hard it is to grasp how tiny the towns are, drowned in geography. We also talked about how the railway industry is all about transferring, moving on, change. Transportation of people as well as goods. The nature of the industry reflected in how it operates. Met Patricia Tokei from CN, who said she wouldn't have transferred to Winnipeg if CN had relocated their head office there. Also interested to find out she worked in the CN library before becoming editor of *Movin'*.

I really like Kris Rabe. Intelligent and thoughtful. I mentioned how I had switched from a university environment to private industry. Kris asked if I was pleasantly surprised by some things about the switch. I said yes, that industry is so much less cut-throat than academia. Universities are full of the real Machiavellis and apparatchiks and although I loved being on campus, met interesting people and had access to so much information I didn't have the stomach for university politics. Kris told me she heard through the grapevine that I'm a "fantastic writer (over and above doing my job)." I couldn't resist asking who she heard that from. She mentioned Len Cocolicchio. Len?! I can't imagine it. I'll bet she heard it from Peta. They were at the same conference last year.

A group of us went into St Armand. Campy disco band. I went to the dance floor to watch them and the next thing I knew I was at the front dancing, dancing on my own, joining groups of random people. I have never done that before. Leanne MacGruder admired me for it.

### **Sept. 21**

Conference day, presentations until 3:00.

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Investment and railway companies:

- In 1995 the industry was perceived as stable, positive. “Soft cyclicals.” Service improvement. A growing market share with improving profit margins. Mergers were seen as important “can’t-miss” opportunities. Railways were also seen as conserving capital spending. Rising free cash flow.  $\text{Cash flow} = \text{net income} + \text{depreciation} - \text{capital investment}$ .

- Now in 1998 things have soured. Service complaints rising. Unprecedented meetings with shippers to an extent investors have never seen. In 1998 no free cash flow, too much catch-up spending. Possibility of government intervention. Bottlenecks, revenue adequacy. Investors started questioning mergers and the market doesn’t like questions.

- Investors want to see happy shippers, lawmakers not under pressure to act, rebuilding market share.

- Railways are still the cheapest mode of transportation but are not perceived as reliable. Profit margins matter. Restrained capital spending and more free cash flow. Market value of any business = the present value of future cash available to its owners. Moderate growth with lots of cash is better than rapid growth with no cash. (Then why is CN still so high?)

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Investor communications at Union Pacific with VP Mary Jones:

– Two sides to investor relations. A: sell-side analysts (brokerage houses, buy-sell analysts, portfolio managers who make decisions on what to buy. B: senior management, business groups, boards of directors. A is trying to communicate with B.

Mary Jones apologized on behalf of Union Pacific for their service problems then continued with a top ten list for communicating when things do go wrong. It was fascinating to hear her talk about the problems at UP. You could hear the emotion in her voice

– Tell the truth (no, things aren't fixed yet). Think like an analyst. Investors and analysts translate everything that happens in a company to dollars and cents, cash flow, earnings. The words you use in a press release can influence this. Know the facts. Investors are insatiable about facts. Stay in sync. You have to know what everyone is saying about you. Reporters and customers both call analysts. Be consistent on all fronts.

– Keep talking. Silence is anathema to investors. Nothing is off-the-record. Investors are gossip mongers. Never move more than twice a year (!! ) Get a life. Otherwise stress will come out in your voice and body language. This will influence investors.

– Never say things can't get any worse. Union Pacific didn't predict correctly the ability of its directional track running to clear up Texas-Louisiana congestion. UP didn't predict the inability of new train crews to master the procedures.

– Never lose hope. We say UP is now in a rebuilding stage although news reports call us a merged mess.

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Crisis Communications workshop.

Realities of the business communications environment:

– 24 hour news operations, rise of info-tainment e.g., Dateline  
– entrepreneurial journalism, programming for the masses as profit, growth of the talking head industry

– Internet search engines pick up negative "anti-sites." An example is BEAR putting out anti-CPR propaganda and search engines rating it to appear first. Monitoring the Web is crucial.

- Content must be current, especially in “What’s New” sections.
- Get your message out in as much detail as possible before your opposition groups speak first.
- Four phases of crisis development: the warning (pre-crisis), the outbreak (acute stage), process (will you endure?), restoration
- Five Rs of crisis communication: relationships, regret (express it), reform (promise it), restitution (to victims), responsibility.
- Audiences for communications. Employees must be informed. Otherwise rumour mills leak false info. Unions should be brought in on everything. Customers, investors, government agencies, politicians, community leaders, lawyers, bankers, families of victims.
- Railway crises can include derailments, grade crossing accidents, trespassers, chemical spills, collisions, labour issues (strikes), crew error. All these are knowable and will be faced at some point. No “ifs” about it.

## Sept 22

Presentations continue.

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Leveraging the corporate brand

- A brand is really a perception. Products are made in the factory – brands are made in the mind. Brands perform in a predictable way. Some brands transcend the products they represent. Products create choices. Brands simplify choices. Brands create bonds. Brand also tap secondary markets. McDonald’s golden arches gives them margin protection over time. A brand is like an insurance policy.
- Brand communications includes logo, advertising, presentations, stationery, environments, signage, vehicles
- Brand identification takes time and commitment, fundamental understanding of product, company and market. No brand value without real product value.

Process:

- Understand brand fundamentals (intelligence), define the brand (strategy), create brand expressions (communication). Apply the brand strategically. Sometimes it just needs a brand repositioning. E.g, Turning Caterpillar Company from strip mining and wreaking havoc on the earth to pulling down the Berlin Wall, to making things possible.

Railways:

- We talk too much about ourselves. Too many pictures of trains. We're in the transportation business and we lose sight of that. What are we delivering? 80 per cent of railway business is generated by 20 per cent of our customers.

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Scott Roberts from CN spoke on developing community relations. This was my least favourite presentation. He's a name-dropper - "Last week Tellier and I were in ..." It was also interesting how he referred to CPR almost exclusively as "our competitor." No one else here has spoken like that about another railway. Everyone else has been nothing but collegial and united.

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Speech writing – White House Writers' Group

- It's about managing trust. Truth is the underlying issue. Market share issues, investors and regulatory community, media/political community. Politicians are always looking at public opinion tomorrow. All this goes into building messages.

- Advertising not something that can be done once. The average person had to be hit ten times before they even recognized a candidate being advertised on TV. Useful for laying down a basic message. A limited instrument that can provide a set of themes the rest of your communications can resonate to.

- Trucking industry a major impetus for all the railway mergers.

- Speeches are a highly compressed form: message, moment and person. You have to keep the sound-bite in mind, a phrase or expression someone will remember. There are tricks you can use to keep people remembering.

- Names that capture ideas, eg, Great Leap Forward, Iron Curtain. Give your idea a name with an image attached to it. Build on popular culture, what a mass of people already know. Capturing your central idea means you have to have one.
- People remember series of threes (blood sweat and tears).
- News of the day. Tie your message into that. Works like a pop culture tie-in.
- Capitalize on your speaker's strengths and position, what people will want to hear him speak about. Humour is memorable but choose the right type for the speaker, though.
- Talk about things that are new. Public always wants "inside" info.
- Keep in mind what the audience wants to hear. What do the details mean to them? Get into the minds of the audience.
- Make speechwriting a negotiating process. Contact people first so they psychologically feel consulted. They'll be more inclined to accept what you've written.

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Presentations ended at three o'clock. Immediately went back to the beach. Sun in, sun out, blue-green ocean. Pelican conference on the pier. I was joined by John Prescott and Kris Rabe. Kris went for a walk with Jackie, John and I ventured into the ocean and joined some of the others. I really like John. In this short time he's become a friend, my conference companion. He really seems to like chumming around with me. We rib each other about Calgary vs Omaha.

Hurricane warning. We've all become obsessed with the Weather Channel. Hurricane Georges has slammed Haiti and people are being evacuated from the Florida keys. Stores are running out of plywood to cover the windows of houses and businesses. No one knows what path it will take yet. So far we're still okay.

Reception in the Tennis View Suite. Met Bill Biggs of Regional and Short Line Railroad Association. He was a thoughtful, emotional man. We talked about marital break-ups and he said it felt like broken crockery inside him. Neither of us knew how we ended up on that topic. We also talked about bilingualism. He's fascinated by people who can switch from one language to another, wonders which language they think, write, dream in. So many truly interesting conversations. These are really my people.

Ended up beside Leanne MacGruder at the conference dinner. She's a cool character and looked very glamorous tonight in polka dots. Most of the time she's worn her hair pulled back in a fluffy blond ponytail under a baseball cap. Her eyes are deadly, straight-edged as if taking aim – the eyes of a Persian cat. She skipped most of the presentations, showed up for the speech-writing because she writes speeches for David R Goode. She told me she really enjoyed meeting me, that I'm a "wild woman."

Len and Susan Terpay hosted the award presentation. CPR picked up four awards; Best Newspaper, Best News Story for Bob Stewart's piece on the ice storm, Best Overall News Coverage. And ... Best Feature Article went to "Lesley's Excellent Adventures." Number 1 of 21 entries. One of the judges even gave me a perfect 10.

Susan announced the category of Best Feature Article. The slide showed "Canadian Pacific Railway." The next slide a picture of "Lesley's Excellent Adventures" as it appeared in the *CPR News*. Susan said, "She set off to cover a story about CP's new identity and its logotrain. But because of scheduling problems the train wasn't there. So she came back with something else." After the ceremony on to the Presidential Suite where I was congratulated. Wined, dined and feted. Had a look at the written critiques that came with each entry. Ralph's video didn't win, although it was in the running. CN snagged that one. John Timmins had submitted a video that a judge said was "very amateurish."

Traditional group walk along the beach. Dark ocean rolling in and out with its luminous foam. Stars. Continued on down the beach with Marmie Edwards and John Prescott. I wish I could remember all the things John and I talked about. It's so hard describing a kindred spirit. So much easier to describe someone you can't stand. Throughout the week we've talked about the Alberta Clipper, weather fronts from the Dakotas, his work as a TV reporter, the ruralness of Nebraska and Alberta. How much nobler I thought it was to work for a university and assist students than "Corporate America."

John and I lay on lawn chairs for a while, absorbing the vastness of the ocean, the sky and all its stars. Everyone had pretty much dispersed. Finally John and I walked back up to our suites. The last night. I hate endings and this week could have gone on forever. I told him how much I enjoyed his company throughout the conference. He was emotional when he said he had really enjoyed mine. “You’re a nice lady, you’re a very special person and you have a brilliant career ahead of you.” The we did what he calls “the Canadian kiss” - on both cheeks. The perfect end to a perfect end to a perfect moment in time.

### **Sept. 23**

I will leave the Colony knowing that I networked, I met people who liked me for myself and I can hold my own among peers. It was one of the best times I have ever had in my life. I didn’t want to leave the Colony and it seemed my subconscious tried its best to stop me. Took a last morning walk along the beach. I didn’t see anyone, didn’t want to. I wanted to hold onto last night as long as possible. When I finally got around to packing I ended up locking the key in the car and had to wait for the AAA to come bail me out. They did and they were as pleasant and professional as the CAA.

Finally on the road. I didn’t have to be at the airport until the 25<sup>th</sup> and could take my time and explore. South down Longboat Key and explores St Armand’s Circle. Playground for the wealthy. Nothing but designer clothing stores, rarefied goods, handbags. Nothing that even tempted me. Sunny; hot. No sign of Hurricane Georges. Strolled down palm-lined boulevards, scoured white sand. The sandy road so light, opening up to ocean at its end. Light and space. Yet side roads led to darkness and you feel as if you’re descending. Small houses, sunken jungly vines. Drove to the Best Western in Sarasota. Hurricane warnings upgraded. The keys at the tip of Florida washed away, residents forced to evacuate.

The hotel was in an interesting neighbourhood. Prowled around the area, curious as to what it would be like to live surrounded by sub-tropical vegetation in this climate. What is daily life like? Small houses, vacant lots, seedy palms. Scrub creeping over pumps, sheds and porches and then the houses, twining into windows and pushing up the floorboards.



Creeping trails of leaf coming ever closer. Shadows made by baby palmettos and crepe myrtles. Sinuous shadows of liveoaks. Everything drapes, drops, unfurls, unspools. The eye is always led downward. All bungalows but such a variety. An amazing house with Buddhist statues at the screen door. A grove of bamboo shoots rising up to the sky. Chinese symbols and wind chimes beside a Beware of Dog sign. A Harley Davidson in front. Florida seems to be a very syncretic place.

Made my way down to Bayshore Drive. Smaller houses gave way to mansions. Shimmer of ocean – owned and tended by staff. Pastel walls, wrought iron gates. Well manicured palm trees, lawns like golf courses. Again noted how Florida loves to evoke Hawaii with Polynesian images. Dinner at the Mel-O-Dee restaurant, a mean little family operation where the manager tyrannized the waitresses. Back to my room and the Weather Channel. More swirling green blotches circling up from Haiti. Warning for Sarasota area. Decided I had better get the car back to Tampa before the weather turned on me and cancelled my second night in Sarasota.

## **Sept. 24**

Breakfast with a nice elderly couple from Washington State. It seems they did the same thing I did on the 275 South. There's a fork in the expressway with one sign: 275 South Bradenton. The other was an exit into St Petersburg. I read the 275 sign as an exit into Bradenton. They did exactly the same thing and also ended up in a strange area of St P, with no apparent way of rejoining the 275. I think we all felt vindicated.

Headed to Tampa. Perfect morning for driving. Enjoyed the Talon today. The 75 is an easy straightforward interstate and it was well after rush hour. Paused at a lovely rest area where I could see the Skyway Bridge in the distance; delicate, ghostly, a dream. Soon I was on it again, heading up into the clouds. A thrilling drive, comparable to my first drive to Bragg Creek. Last news from Sarasota was that it was borderline Georges territory. Trailer owners were asked to voluntarily evacuate last night. I feel as if I'm being stalked!

Made some smooth lane changes to avoid Exit Onlys, those lanes that appear and vanish again at whim. A lot easier on a sunny day than in the middle of a tropical storm after dark. The hardest part was finding the Thrifty's to drop the car off. They called a taxi for me at Thrifty's. An executive service car arrived. Limousine-sized with plush seats, the whole works at regular taxi fare because it was the only vehicle available. I do seem to have amazing luck with travel vehicles. I sat back, let the professionals take me to another Best Western, near Busch Gardens.

The Best Western was had a huge cathedral-like atrium. Muggy inside though, eerie dim light. Hotel management was trying to cut corners on air-conditioning. Barely enough staff for any of the mundane functions of a hotel. A line-up of people checked in and served by one elegant Black woman whose patience and intelligence were being tried. The woman (white) ahead of me in the check-in line was outraged because she couldn't pay by cheque. She was staying in the hotel to see a preacher and didn't want to commit herself to reserving a room for a second night if she had seen enough of the preacher. She kept repeating that she was here to see the preacher. To give herself a sense of entitlement? Religion is involved so she deserves special treatment? I was glad to be so low maintenance.

Explored. Went on a wetlands walk and got to see a Florida swamp after all – on my last day. Vines sleeving trees, pythoning branches. Light glinting along the edges of palms, palmettos. Frogs! A snowy egret. Autumn has barely begun here and the yellowed leaves littering the ground are far different from the ones back home. Big fat cushiony leaves, the texture of banana peels. Black water, leaves floating on stagnant water. Earth like a waterbed mattress. So humid I felt like a sac of hot fluid.

Returned to the Best Western and slipped into the lounge so I could watch the Weather Channel on a big screen. I must have been watching the weather the way two women beside me were gazing into the VLT machine. Longboat Key was hit. All the shops at St Armand closed up. Shutters nailed tight, windows covered with plywood. People fitting plywood and boards to the glass. Stores sold out of sandbags, which are used as ballast to keep porches and sheds from washed away by floodwater. A man who was interviewed said, "Once the waters rose and bodies floated from the bury ground."

A man who was sitting alone at the bar started talking to me. Conversation was interesting and I had a couple of beers. He was from West Virginia, now living in Dallas. Thickest accent I have ever heard. He was from the West Virginia mountains. “Ah’m a hillbilly. You know what a poke is? You go into a store there and they’ll say ‘You wanna paper poke or a plastic poke?’” He was once a quality manager for Texas Instruments. “I was the one who organized everybody into teams. You go into these board meetings and ever’body’s so educated and then you start seein’ ‘em throw things at each other and yelling.”

According to him he was fired by Texas Instruments because he wouldn’t be “the dupe to lay off some illiterate women working in the office. They could do their jobs, had kids to feed. I couldn’t do it and the sonsabitches fired me. Three security guards escorted me out the door.” Now he’s an ostrich rancher living on the outskirts of Dallas. From his language I was convinced he really had been a quality manager. Like Ralph, not only the drinking, but also in that fifty per cent is true, fifty per cent pure fantasy. Yet there was a nice person inside hi,m. His eyes were blue and genuinely friendly. Lips like Jimmy Carter. Long youthful face, dressed business casual. He said he “lost” his wife and twin daughters fifteen years ago. My guess would be be drinking.

I treated him like a nice, friendly Texan, someone generous to a stranger – a cold Canadian at that. I acted as if that was all there was to him. My luck held out. He didn’t become angry or maudlin. We talked for a while longer then parted without any drama. I went for dinner in the Best Western restaurant, which was seriously understaffed. Instant mashed potatoes! I had intended to go for a walk but the neighbourhood seemed a little rough for a tourist like me. Pawn shop signs overlooking the strip, side streets leading into darkness. Tiny dilapidated houses. Weathered red sign advertising Corinna’s Spanish Food. Beside that, the Interstate Lounge offered fifty cent beer, cheques cashed, guns sold. Groups of men loitering in the parking lot. Police station right in the hotel. I ended the journey the way I began it. Off the beaten track.

## Sept. 25

To the Tampa airport in the Best Western shuttle van. The driver loves driving. He was also proud to point out that he's an evangelical christian. Intriguing roadside glimpses, life in the margins. It always seems that the things I most want to see are only fleeting glimpses on the road to somewhere else. Peering at the real city through chinks in a curtain. Truly frightening pink barracks of a Presbyterian college. Arrived at the elegant Tampa airport. A man wearing a T-shirt that said, "Promise Keepers. Men with Integrity."

Sky lowering; wartime feeling. Every greyer, more and more fluid. Terminal packed with people wanting out of Florida. No stand-by flights open. The flight was overbooked. American Airlines offered \$400 in travel vouchers to anyone willing to give up their seats. None of us were willing. In fact, we all laughed. Downpour began. We all looked at each other fearing we wouldn't make it out after all. But made my connection at Chicago O'Hare to Calgary with no time to spare. Fred waiting to pick me up. Shocked by a blast of Alberta air. I left the airport, walked into the wind, huddled like a suspect being taken into custody. Nice to see the amber glow of autumn leaves, though. To Chicken Hawks for dinner where I mimicked Southern accents for our server, Sean.

## Sept. 28

Return to the 20<sup>th</sup> floor. Voice mail message from Kris Rabe of BNSF. She asked if I could send her some copies of the "Excellent Adventures." Said she wants to learn from "the best of the best." (!!!) Also a lovely email from Marmie Edwards. The conference was real. My lovely lovely dream conference.

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The ARC (Association of Railway Communicators) box finally arrived to the office. I read the judges' comments. One judge, Dan Piedmont, gave me 30/30 for the "Excellent Adventures." He wrote, "Though long, this story rewards patience – it is a delight to read, and I would have been glad to have my name in the by-line. There's wonderful details ... A fine job!"

Dan also gave the CPR News 30/30 for best overall news coverage. “Professional all the way. I especially admired the ‘Icebound’ story and ‘Lesley’s Excellent Adventures.’ Keep up the good work – and give Ms B a raise!” I made copies of his comments, underlined the raise bit and put them on Ralph’s desk.

### **Oct. 30-Nov. 1**

Fred crews for a pair of hot air balloonists, when the weather is good enough for them to fly and they need an extra hand. He met them through his amateur radio hobby. There was a hot air balloon convention going on this weekend so he arranged for the two of us to go. We drove out after work on Friday night. Checked in at the Spruce View Hotel located in Red Deer County in central Alberta. Surrounded by stubbly fields, farmland, rolling countryside. Tiny country stores. Grocery store with a farm supplies section twice as large as the food section. Log cabin church. We turned up and down dead-straight gravel roads until we reached the property of a retired rancher and his family including a daughter and son-in-law who are balloonists. Soon the ranch was over-run with customized trucks, vans, all manner of balloon paraphernalia. We met in a wooden roundhouse, crackling bonfire in the centre of the room, vintage Calgary Stampede posters on the wooden pillars and walls.

After a night in the Spruce View, Fred and I returned to the ranch. I helped Connie, Andy, Fred and Lorne set up for their balloon flight. This required tugging the huge wicker basket out of the truck. We set up the instrument panel and burner, unfurled the balloon from its giant bag, held down the cords while Andy filled the envelope with air from a giant fan. Watched the behemoths twitch, roll over, come to life all around me. The envelope moved like the tide. The balloon ripples, swells with hot air. The basket is turned over and the balloon is ready for take off. Colours: red and white, green and yellow, purple and blue. Just like genies rubbed out of lamps.

I got to go on the first flight on Saturday morning. Connie summoned me. I climbed into the basket, half excited, half petrified. The balloon started rising and I couldn't look down. I could only turn my head, look level at the sky. Gradually I released my grip on the side of the basket and looked down at rivers, cattle, tiny farms, tree tops. The burner crisped my face and upper body. Cold feet, though. I learned that every air current has a name, making me realize how basic weather reports are. Air current from trees is far different from the air rising from an open area. A thermal is an air current that rises. Sun heating a farmer's field can create that and will affect a balloon flight, speed of ascent, etc. It is a wondrous feeling to be so close, so attuned to air movement. Of course Connie and Andy know the name of every kind of cloud formation and what each one means to a balloon.

Bumpy landing. I was told to brace myself with good reason. There's nothing to cushion a landing, no wheels on the basket. I braced myself but was still pitched forward so my nose went into one of the pumps. The pumps are padded so no damage done. It's also a concern that someone heavier will topple onto you while landing. That didn't happen to me. I got out of the basket, replaced by Fred and Lorne. Andy and I became chase crew.

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Afternoon flight on the 31<sup>st</sup>. I found out that it's traditional to fly in costume on Halloween. One of the pilots approached me, face encased in a pilot's hat, tinted goggles, leather bomber jacket topped off with a white silk scarf. He extended a gloved hand and introduced himself as Joseph Montgolfier. Another pilot flapped into the roundhouse, purple lab coat streaming behind him, grey shock wig slightly askew. Jules Verne, of course.

The balloonists herded out to the field and sent the pi-balls (pilot information balloons) on their journey. Uncertain conditions, only experienced pilots were allowed to make this trip. I didn't get to go on this flight. I watched Orville Wright, Jules Verne, Leonardo Da Vinci and Amelia Earhart rise into the sky.

Fred and I were part of the chase crew, which meant hopping in Lorne's truck and following the balloon's voyage best we could from the ground. The pilot, Connie, radioed us as to where they were likely to land and we tried to get there via roads. Roads are counter-intuitive to balloon flights, though, and it was quite a challenge to keep the balloon in sight. The balloons land in farmers' fields so we had to knock on someone's door and ask permission to drive the truck into his fields to retrieve our balloon. According to Andy, most farmers are good-humoured about the intrusions and many like to come out and watch.

In the middle of a stubbly field, packing up the balloon again, heaving it into the bag, sitting on the bag to keep the envelope inside it. We put the instruments away, slid the basket into the truck. Connie and Andy have it down to a fine art. When we were finished we helped out a nearby team whose ground crew got lost. Then back to a Halloween party and bonfire in the roundhouse. Andy, who is a 911 emergency supervisor when he's not flying, regaled us with jokes and stories.

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Fred and I part of the chase crew on the Sunday morning flight. This time when the balloon landed in a farmer's field the whole family came out to meet it. Another balloon and crew ended up beside us in the same field. After picking up, packing the envelope, the pilots brought out champagne bottles. We all partook in an impromptu champagne party in the middle of the field. Pilots, chase crew, farmer and family. Complete with red-checked tablecloth, long-stemmed vase with a rose in it. Made me think of the 1920s. Apparently, champagne after a flight has been traditional since the Montgolfier Brothers, who made their first flight in 1783. And a lovely, classy one it is too!